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Introduction: Region and Civilization

INDIA AND ITS HISTORY

Nationalism supplies and feeds on continuous histories of discrete peoples and cultures. But the nation-state is a phenomenon of the modern era and long-term national histories are therefore more or less bogus. Peoples have linear inheritances, but also they experience discontinuities and external influences. How then can there be a history of 'India'?

A history of India must justify itself firstly through its focus on place. To some extent this too is arbitrary, for the territory of present-day India has not always had a clear regional identity. At different periods, parts of it were clearly excluded from the cultural and political mainstream. Apart from many political subdivisions, environments could be divisive, as in other parts of the world: uplands were often distinct from lowlands, and dry from irrigated tracts, and west-east linkages mostly proved easier and more integrating than north-south ones. Often too parts of the subcontinent seemed to belong more closely to wider regions than with each other, as was seen in the connections between southern India and south-east Asia around the end of the first millennium CE (Common Era), or in north India's involvement with a Turko-Persian world from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, or even, adding a class divide, in the economic and intellectual engagement of some elites with the West during the British colonial era. These links, and local destinies, define regions *within* India. A major theme of this book is the interplay between such regions and empires of rule, custom and belief.

India is *now* a recognizable (if contested) unit, for all its internal variety. Most of the subcontinent does not now comprise a congeries of small nations, but rather the modern all-Indian state. It is possible to describe how it was established, both as a matter of recent history and over the longer term. It is a newly demarcated people and territory, but also rests upon very long experience of imperial governments, and also, from even earlier and more consistently, upon a unifying 'civilization' – not some unchanging essence, but persistent ways of thinking and doing. This book will argue that, despite the frequent, originally colonial, emphasis on India's essential diversity, its unity has probably been its most important feature – unlike Europe, and not unlike China.

The continuities of a civilization are like a storehouse in which things decay or are lost, to which things are added, and from which things are selected. Civilizations differ because these inheritances do, because of different experiences, preferences and possibilities. Civilizations may draw together and even merge, or they may draw apart, but their being civilizations means that they have developed with some degree of separation, and within some limits of similarity – physical, economic and ideological. For example, across greater India some features we now call 'Hindu' have been very persistent. To say this is not to endorse the recent equation of 'Indian' with 'Hindu', which has encouraged religio-political schisms in the subcontinent, helped separate off Pakistan and Bangladesh, and led certain factions to contest the Indianness both of India's many millions of Muslims, and of certain colonial legacies (including secular government, even the rule of law).

The story of India's partition and 'Hindu-ization' are among those to be told in this book, but there are many others, for India has not been defined by 'Hindu' civilization alone, nor are its features identical in different regions or classes. It has always contained a great variety of traditions. It has also been influenced by exports from other civilizations – for example those of other parts of the prehistorical and ancient world, of West Asian Islam, of European Christianity, or of Western modernity. A second task of this book is to identify and explain these varieties and influences, which also contribute greatly to the unfolding of Indian civilization.

Because civilizational boundaries exist, and yet are porous, diverse influences have added to the storehouse of 'Indian' civilization within a greater 'India'. Sometimes the imports were modified, and sometimes they became accepted as 'Indian', indigenized but more

or less unchanged, just in the way that languages may forget the foreign origin of loan-words. Though India may now be more 'Hindu' than it once was, by new processes of selection and reinvention, that 'Hindutva' (or Hindu-ness) is always a new amalgam. No amount of effort will remove India's historical eclecticism, nor (one suspects) resist the blandishments of new technology and the messages carried by modern communications – which in their turn will be made 'Indian' too, until or unless the civilizational differences themselves fade away.

These issues invite a number of interrelated discussions. Firstly, we need to explore the exercise of political power and political assent or resistance, and the nature and limits of legal, administrative and civic institutions. Secondly, we need to examine the ways society operated – the main social categories (gender, households, kin groups, clans, castes and classes); the distribution of rights, benefits and influence; the enforcement of norms and co-operation; and the religious and philosophical ideas that underwrote the ways in which people lived. Thirdly, we need to consider how people related to the physical environment and met their material needs – including land use, processing and manufacture, technologies and other resources, the means of organizing production, and matters of work, food and health, and demographic trends.

This book cannot be comprehensive in its geographical, chronological or thematic coverage, especially if it hopes to give due weight to the experience of different regions and to subordinate as well as dominant levels of society. Rather, it will examine some aspects of its three main subject areas successively over four different periods. It will make repeated use of headings relating to rule and protest; customs and belief; and material culture, production and trade. The periods are (1) early (prehistorical, from, say, 7500 BCE (before the Common Era), ancient, and early mediaeval); (2) mediaeval (roughly 1000–1560 CE); (3) early modern (roughly 1560–1860); and (4) modern (the 'high colonial' years, 1860–1920, plus decolonization and early independence to about 1970).

The periods are mainly a convenience. There is no very strong logic about them, and each has characteristics that overlap with others. The terms used to describe them are basically chronological, and the dividing dates more or less arbitrary. Yet attempts *will* be made to show how different times developed different characters. In particular, 'modern' is taken to mean 'fairly recent', but also 'new-fashioned' in regard to forms of knowledge, state bureaucracy,

systematic law, social relations, and economy. The assumption is not that India could be modern in exactly the same way as Europe, but rather that both shared in some of the experiences characteristic of the last 150 years or so, common features of (for example) commodities and markets, official policies, public institutions, print and transportation, and generalized social, religious or national identities. This fourth, modern, period will receive the fullest attention. An epilogue will outline the start of what is arguably a new era in India's history, since the 1970s.

This first chapter will now introduce some general aspects of the book's main themes: continuity, plurality and trends in political economy. Because this is a history of 'India', continuities will tend to be emphasized over localism and heterodoxy, both here and in later chapters. Each time, a case will be made to justify such generalization. Because that inevitably involves distortion, however, this book has to be only 'a' history among many potential histories of India. As said, however, unifying tendencies are emphasized also because of their importance for defining the history of these lands and peoples.

RULE

It is implicit in most discussions that different periods of history may be characterized by different kinds of state (usually in combination with different kinds of economy). Changes may be attributed to the stimulation of competition – such as when warfare developed technologies, fiscal capabilities and national identities. Unfamiliar situations also demand responses, and so conquest and colonialism also helped spawn bureaucracies and new laws. India's systems of government have included some very early city cultures, nomadic military regimes, settled farming communities, family dynasties, commercial and foreign-imperial powers, and modern constitutional systems. Political changes have not been even or irreversible. But, as elsewhere, the long-term trend has been towards consolidation and expansion, towards centralized, bureaucratic, information-rich states controlling relatively integrated economies and intervening in social life. In India such states emerged from time to time over the millennia, and have persisted more or less continuously since the Mughals in the sixteenth century. Though the Mughals succumbed to internal and external challenges in the early eighteenth century,

they were succeeded by centralized regional states, which were overtaken by British colonial rule, which in turn was followed by the would-be hegemonic states of independent South Asia.

On the other hand, though state policy and capacity have plainly evolved, the Indian state's geographical, ethnic and ideological boundaries have continued to be contested – in recent times by Sikhs, Tamils, Kashmiris and many others. Despite central planning, unified law and nationwide communications, India has not achieved a fully integrated economy or society, either regionally or socially. As already suggested, Hindu nationalists now seek to deny India's religious and ethnic plurality, but India does not and arguably cannot have that popular sense of unitary nationhood which elsewhere has justified highly centralized democracies. These paradoxes were also important to India's political development.

The first evidence of organized communities in South Asia is provided by palaeolithic implements dating back more than 400 000 years. The first recognized cultures, based on agriculture, domestic animals, and the production and exchange of pottery and other artefacts, date from around 7500 BCE. The earliest literate city-states, implying sophisticated political and economic systems, can be traced to about 3000 BCE. The Harappan or Indus valley civilization, as the best-known of these is called, lasted between about 2500 and 1750 BCE. Over the next two thousand years, settled cultivation expanded considerably across the north Indian plains, probably aided by the progressive migration of formerly pastoral peoples and by the development of Sanskrit-speaking elites (neither to be crudely imagined as an 'Aryan invasion'). Classes of rulers and priests were defined, and recorded in the earliest of the surviving texts of Indian philosophy and law. The learned commentaries and philosophical texts (discussed below), which were composed between the seventh and fourth centuries BCE, suggest a mature civilization: cities, social divisions, and stable law and structures of power. In the third century BCE, the first of the great Indian empires developed, under Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, centred upon north-eastern India, in what is now Bihar. These rulers had theories of government, the ability to extract tribute or taxation, and the administrative capacity to promote codes of behaviour over wide regions. Under these 'ancient' or 'classical' regimes, some of the continuing features of Indian society were established.

Later, doctrines of law and kingship were further defined and developed, but few subsequent early rulers matched the Mauryans'

centralizing ability, not even the Gupta empire of the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Instead, especially after about the sixth century, successive regional polities emerged, often in the wake of invasions or military immigration which had become an important influence a little before the start of the Common Era. From around 1000 CE, notable among these regional powers were various Rajput dynasties in the west and north, the Cholas who emerged to replace the Pallavas in the south, and Islamic rulers intruding from the north-west. This rise and fall of local kingdoms and the lack of sustained central authority led to later assertions that, in India, kingly and political power was subordinated to social, religious and local authority. These arguments will be discussed later. It will suffice for now to note that they rest on false dichotomies.

The later mediaeval period in north India began with the establishment in Delhi of the Turkic Delhi sultanate, holding power over almost all of north India by 1236, and the dominance of Hindu kingdoms in the south, particularly, from about 1340 to 1565, one centred upon Vijayanagara (City of Victory) in present-day Karnataka. These regimes began to introduce distinctive forms of government based upon military coercion and alliances. The Delhi sultans reached their height in the fourteenth century (under the Khaljis and early Tughlaqs) when they had created systems of administration incorporating indigenous elites. The Vijayanagara empire developed paid village officials, and military and bureaucratic relations with subordinate lords in order to extract tributary payments in money; but it also had to accommodate these territorial chiefs and other local or community rights, and depended on the sponsorship of temples and on Brahman military commanders. The importance of family and personal relations, and the still indirect control over the localities, make these empires transitional but still 'mediaeval'.

The Mughal empire eventually ousted its rivals, and claimed control over almost all of the subcontinent from the mid-sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. It was continually reinforced from outside India, especially from Iran. It saw a flowering of Islamic scholarship, supported Muslim religious endowments, and was influenced to varying degrees by the *ulama* (scholars of Islam). It also continually used military force, and even emperors (notably Akbar, who ruled (r.) 1556–1605, and Aurangzib, r. 1658–1707) took to the field of battle in person. But, unlike the Ottomans and other Islamic empires of the day, the Mughals depended neither on a

slave bureaucracy nor on an elite wholly centred on court and harem. Mughal generals and administrators were appointed competitively, and increasingly positions of power were awarded and recorded through written documentation. The Mughals depended upon complex networks of patronage and personal allegiance, from *mansabdars* (honorific rank-holders who were high military and civil officials) to local *zamindars* (rural revenue-collecting elites and chiefs).

The local chiefs and also many hereditary local officials could not be dislodged, but they were largely incorporated into new systems of administration. The Mughal state drew upon the support of non-Muslim gentry, merchants and literati, forging alliances mainly through policies of religious tolerance and conciliation devised by Akbar. Such collaboration was vital outside the garrison towns and north Indian heartlands of the Mughals, and important even within those centres. The state's growing roles were necessary (and possible) because its wealth derived from a high taxation of the vast and expanding production of the land, and also from the encouragement of trade, including that with Europe, and from an economy that was highly monetized in its upper levels.

There was always a danger that local elites would become entrenched as regional factions, as happened during the eighteenth century. But the Mughals may be termed 'early modern' because they added a panoply of general concepts and procedures, and indeed of manners and culture, much of which was adopted in the eighteenth century by the successor regional powers, including the British East India Company. Perhaps, like the British, they were forced to develop bureaucratic and presentational strengths because they were a small and not particularly united ruling elite in an alien land.

The British rose to supreme power in India between about 1740 and 1860. Their government rested on existing practices, imported ideologies and pragmatic responses to unfamiliar situations. To a much greater extent than the Mughals, however, they developed regular forms and means of governance, standardizations of law and policy, and maximizing and even developmental economic strategies. The twentieth century saw the culmination of a long change in emphasis in the resourcing of states, as tributes from agrarian producers developed into the taxation of commercial activity and trade. It also saw the culmination of a nineteenth-century burgeoning of public institutions which enabled Indians to develop

and express their ideas of regional, class, community and caste identity, and which led to organized struggles for social, political and economic rights, and for national independence. Much of this framework of rule was inherited and developed by the successor government of India after 1947, at least until the 1970s.

The establishment of modern nation-states eventually divided up the subcontinent into India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. These states reflected different (though also sometimes shared) historical experiences. They both contained and divided earlier regional consolidations – linguistic and cultural units – many of which are still clearly evident. Particularly violent and painful were the partitions of India and Pakistan in 1947, and of West Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971; but other regional divisions have often threatened or succeeded – of various ‘marginal’ peoples such as Nagas or Santhals from the regional states which enveloped them; of Sikhs from Hindus in the Punjab; of Gujaratis and Maharashtrians in western India; of southern Tamil- or Telegu-speakers from the Hindi-dominated north.

REGION AND UNITY

There is a strong (and often justified) temptation to see the Indian case as particular; but its political history is a familiar one in outline. In most parts of Europe and Asia, local polities and economies frequently predominated in ancient and mediaeval times, but there were also ‘imperial’ systems of varying form: large empires of rule, thought, language and practice that produced a degree of cultural and social unity among elites, at the expense of commonality across classes in each given place. These ‘empires’ suppressed or diffused competition between localities. In western Europe, for example, one had Latin and Christianity; in India, Sanskrit and Buddhism or Brahmanism. Then, in early modern and modern Europe, narrower polities and economies developed that sought to unite all the people within given regional territories or nations. They managed, in Durkheimian terms, to extend and merge the solidarities of similarity and proximity, to mobilize whole communities and places, under unified rule.

Dominant, multi-purpose national languages were an important indicator of these solidarities. In many parts of Europe, though effective linguistic unity came quite late, the forms of modern lan-

guage that were developed were demotic, regional and relatively uniform, serving all the functions and peoples of the nation. This indicates a particularly Indian problem. The mirror image of, say, classical Sumerian used by the elites for writing in ancient Mesopotamia – ‘The Sumerian monitor said, “You spoke in Akkadian!” and he beat me’ (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tr. Andrew George) – is multi-functional French being forced on nineteenth-century Breton schoolboys, or the less successful efforts of the Hindi movement in twentieth-century India. But even Hindi/Urdu did not develop as a dominant standard language in India in the sense that French did within France. The regional Indian languages, including Hindi, did so develop within their regions, but their role was generally qualified by different ‘national/imperial’ – here meaning specialist or elite – languages. Persian and English filled these roles, as Sanskrit had. So too, once they had emerged, Indian regional identities achieved political expression to different degrees, being most evident in the mediaeval period, in the eighteenth century, and in recent Indian politics; but they were more generally subordinated to larger polities.

What has made India distinct, therefore, is not the vitality of its regional states (many at least the size of European nations) but the trajectory of greater consolidation that we have just traced, intermittently, from ancient to early modern times. As explained at the outset, evidence of overlap, separation and subdivision qualifies the story of state expansion in India. But it does not refute it. The present-day nation-states do mark a triumph for unitary sovereignty, centralized administration and firm boundaries. They contend with, but ultimately subsume, other modes of political power, including those which had existed among marginal peoples and territories. Moreover, the rivals of such ‘modern’ regimes mostly use modern means and ideologies to frame their political demands and identities. Thus the present states of the Indian subcontinent may be said to mark a stage in time, in the project of political consolidation and incorporation that began with Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, and ebbed and flowed until it produced its current definition and borders, under Mughal and then British rulers.

The Mughal empire overlaid regional or national conflicts, and encouraged a generalization of elite culture; fertile rivalries were reduced. From the late seventeenth century, regional powers began, in competition, to generate economic and political change. But then British rule intervened: it quashed regional conflicts, and re-adopted

imperial forms. Moreover, it perpetuated or reinvented the elite–popular cultural divide. The British, like the Mughals, tried to install a superior government, but it connected only loosely to existing local institutions and deployed organizations in parallel with them. Independent India too has often depended more on national elites than on all-India solidarities.

The nineteenth century provided improved means to sustain these elites, including new laws, bureaucracy, market rationales and modern communications. Many of the innovations were readily adapted and adopted by Indians, but others were foreign to Indian experience. They were applied as an artificial imperium rather than as a reflection of territorial and social particularities. This resulted in some disparities of development. Like England, but unlike (say) Poland or Hungary, India developed a powerful bureaucracy before it had local or national assemblies. This drew the state's attention to the reform and regulation of common or central institutions, and meant that there were no organized special interests strong enough to thwart the state. Arguably 'India' was anyway the wrong size for such an effort.

Moreover, unlike England, colonial India had no participatory local self-government linked to the centralizing state. The early colonial regime had tended to ignore or damage such links as existed – it often overrode local power-brokers, marginalized religious leaders and sometimes abolished village officials. Later efforts were made to rebuild such institutions, through the reinvention of a supposedly indigenous village community, through quasi-feudal fantasies of prince and landlord, or by transplanting English local or representative government. The inconsistency and relative weakness of these efforts meant that local interests had difficulty not just in impeding the state, but also in influencing or sharing in it. One result was the persistence of social and political arenas – intermixed (socio-political) black economies – outside the formal purview of the state and its laws, but inside the broad 'civilizational' fields of Indian culture.

The all-India nationalist movements followed the colonial lead and attempted to mobilize all the peoples within 'India' in rivalry with the colonial state. Like that state, they tried to incorporate local and sectional concerns. These concerns were vital and growing (as recent scholarship on low-class protest and 'subaltern' movements has richly demonstrated), and yet (as that scholarship is not so ready to admit) they were still only patchily articulated and mobilized.

Kinship and interest groups were evolving into communities – that is, groups whose identity and moral codes shaped their responses over broad spheres – in the way that the ‘interest’ of religious orthodoxy expanded so as to define positions on most other political and social issues for a whole organized ‘community’ of adherents. In India these communities could not be confined within the one nation. The 1947 partition and the post-independence political adjustments were, in part, attempts to unravel the confusions of such uncompleted evolution. This helps explain why the Indian state is in many respects strong and ‘modern’, but the identity of ‘India’ remains problematic. This point leads us from politics towards society.

BELIEF

India has been enormously influential in the world through its systems of belief. ‘Hindu-ism’, however, is something of a misnomer, in that it is a religion without a unitary doctrine, revelation or textual authority. Its most noticeable attributes are its mythological richness, which can be traced back to the Vedic religion or before, and the variety of its sects and doctrines, also to be seen from the earliest times, but not least in the last 150 years or so. Thus, paradoxically, among the wide range of Indic beliefs, stories, ideas and customs, there are some recurring tenets which hold something of the same significance as notions of sacrifice and salvation in the Judeo-Christian tradition, or the omnipotence of Allah and his Word, the Qur’an, for Islam. Some of these oft-repeated features of ‘Hinduism’ can be briefly introduced through a discussion of the region’s early religious ideas. Later, the developments will be placed in their political and economic contexts.

The earliest important text is the *Rig Veda* (‘veda’ meaning ‘knowledge’), written around 1000 BCE and based on earlier oral traditions. It is the earliest of four texts or *samhitas*, the others being *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. It contains rich celebrations of nature, and sophisticated reflections upon creation, life and death. Its ten books comprise about one thousand hymns (*mantras*), mostly descriptions or invocations of gods, some of which are similar to those in Greek mythology. The Vedic deities, like the Greek, are allocated characteristics, a metaphysical significance, and roles in the creation and sustenance of the physical world. Together they

provide an ethical, mythological and material explanation of a unified cosmic order. They were used in, and are explained by, the great sacrifices and ceremonies which lay at the heart of the Vedic rites – typically the gods provided boons when gratified by large-scale animal sacrifice.

Box 1 Some Vedic gods (devas)

Indra	the fierce warrior-god of rain, thunder and lightning
Varuna	the god of the heavens, sea and the moral order
Agni	the god of fire and sacrifice (and of priests, the Brahmins)
Surya and Savitar	the sun, sun-god
Pushan	another sun-god, guardian of flocks and journeys
Vishnu	also a sun-god and a god of the sacrifice
Soma	a god of vision, joy and immortality (from an intoxicating plant taken during rituals)
Rudra	god of healing, disease and disaster
Aryaman	god of marriage
Mitra	god of vows, attendant on Varuna

Most noticed of the gods is Indra, ‘He of whom all this world is but the copy, who shakes things moveless’ (*Rig Veda* II. 12); ‘the bull, the thunderer’, who dug the channels of the waters (VII. 49). Some of the hymns also lay down rules of human conduct, for example exhortations to charity, since ‘The riches of the liberal never waste away, while he who will not give finds none to comfort him’ (X. 117). One hymn, which has gained special attention, celebrates the cosmic sacrifice of Purusha, the anthropomorphic spirit of the universe, from which the texts and their truths derived, and from whom all living creatures were formed (X. 90):

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya
[Kshatriya] made,
His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was
produced.

Here supposedly established are the four *varna* – priests (*brahmana*), warriors (*kshatriya*), merchants (*vaishya*) and menial or physical labourers (*shudra*) – which provide the great divisions of Indic society. Here too, as elsewhere in *Rig Veda*, one finds the first indications of those perpetual passions of Indian thought, classification and enumeration.

The importance of the sacrifice suggests that the texts were ritualistic and not revelatory in origin. It also implies a society that was highly violent, each successive social level being sustained at the expense of those below it – the ‘law of the fishes’ (*matsyanyaya*), whereby the big ate the little. This may be relevant to another of the most important of India’s recurrent ideas which does not appear in the Vedas, namely that life is a cycle of rebirths, from which there can ultimately be an escape (*moksha*), dependent upon the performance in each lifetime of the proper duties (*dharma*) of one’s calling, and on the transcending of material goals (*artha*) and human desires (*kama*). Some elements of this idea are already apparent in *Rig Veda*. The later emphasis on *kama* is foreshadowed, for example, and linked to the creation of the cosmic order out of darkness and chaos:

Then was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.
 What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?
 Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day’s and night’s divider.
 That one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever
 Thereafter rose desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of spirit.
 Sages who searched with their heart’s thought discovered the existent’s kinship in the non-existent (X. 129).

As they evolved, the Vedic ideas divided into or were superseded by two main streams – coming, that is, from origins within and beyond the Vedic priesthoods. One (the yogic way) emphasized the importance of desire, and hence the need for renunciation. Another emphasized the unity of creation and hence the proper performance of earthly duties. By such means, both developments transformed the ‘law of the fishes’ from a metaphor of order into

one of chaos. The yogic impulse is well represented by Jainism and Buddhism. Jainism is an atheistic religion and the first known attempt to create a single doctrine from the rich Indic traditions. It includes the idea that life (*jiva*), as opposed to inanimate matter and to all worldly actions, is caught in an endless cycle of reincarnation. Through complete self-abnegation and profound contemplation, man can be liberated into an eternal, uncreated infinity beyond the cosmos. Jainism was associated with great teachers, especially Vadhamana, known as Mahavira (great hero), who probably lived in the sixth century BCE, and organized and instructed disciples so that his teachings survived. He, like his much earlier predecessor, Parshva, was said to have practised great austerities, renounced the world, gained true omniscience, and hence immortality.

Buddhism is a subtle and elaborate version of similar ideas of rebirth and austerity. It was developed by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (enlightened one), also born in the sixth century BCE. Buddhism spawned a truly vast literature, starting with canonical texts, the *Tripitaka* (Three Baskets), that contain rules, narratives and commentaries. At the heart of their doctrine is the Noble Eightfold Path: including right thinking and goals, moral conduct, and a proper degree of renunciation and self-discipline (a Middle Way between extremes of abnegation and indulgence). The Buddha gained enlightenment through intense meditation, a contemplation without form, an utter but conscious emptying of the mind – ultimately breaking the cycle of rebirth by transcending the individual, becoming non-self (*anatta*), and perceiving *nirvana*, a state without creation or death.

Though convinced of the transitory nature of things, the followers of the Buddha nevertheless developed orders of nuns and monks (the *Sangha*), proselytized for their beliefs (on the Buddha's instructions), and built monasteries and *stupas*, with their characteristic rounded shape, containing Buddhist relics. The monks in these institutions were dependent upon the alms and bequests of lay followers. Then, as these lay people also sought to approach a higher state of existence, there arose cults of personal devotion (*bhakti*) to the Buddha and his successors (the Buddhas-to-be or Boddhisattvas) – one answer perhaps to the Vedic refrain 'What god shall we adore with our oblation?' (*Rig Veda* X. 121). Lay involvement gave rise in turn to the wider, 'compassionate' or Mahayana Buddhism (Greater Vehicle) as opposed to the stricter, monastic Hinayana Buddhism (Lesser Vehicle). This divide was also marked by doctrinal and

philosophical differences. The second emphasis, upon ritual sacrifice and *dharma* rather than renunciation and contemplation, was found in the developments of the Brahmanist religion which coexisted and competed with the growth of Buddhism.

In response to such challenges, Vedic ideas were expanded into vast commentaries. The *Brahmanas* elaborate and explain myths and rituals. The *Aranyakas* or forest books, possibly so-called because they were produced by hermits, reflect on the rituals and their symbolic meanings. Finally, the *Upanishads* contain both philosophical exposition and teachings in the form of dialogues and parables, offering a variety of explanations of creation, and rules of conduct and of contemplation. Over some five hundred years before the Common Era, the Vedic texts thus became a religious canon, a distinction being made between their authority (*shruti*) and their exposition or explanation (*smriti*). Actual sacrifice became more or less obsolete. The aid sometimes provided by the Vedic gods became a power sustaining all, an intercession to be evoked. The sacrifice of Purusha, the 'kinship' of existent and non-existent, the idea of *brahman* (sacred power), and the practice of ritual, were refashioned into domestic cults, incorporating many current yogic and ethical ideas.

Together they evolved as a notion of *advaita* (non-dualism) – that is, of the essential unity of *Brahma* with the eternal in each individual (*atman*): the self being at one with, of the same essence as, the whole universe, though inhabiting a mortal body. The immanent self or *Brahma*, according to the *Brindaranyaka Upanishad*:

cannot be seen, for, in part only, when breathing, he is breath by name; when speaking, speech by name; when seeing, eye by name; when hearing, ear by name; when thinking, mind by name. All these are but the names of his acts.¹

Alternatively this is translated:

You could not see the seer of seeing. You could not hear the hearer of hearing. You could not think the thinker of thinking. You could not understand the understander of understanding. He is your soul, which is in all things.²

This implied, as well, new emphasis on the individual self, in both Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions.

Classical Hinduism may be regarded as yet another fusion of the devotional (*bhakti*) and Upanishadic tendencies, one in which the gods took on a new and vital significance, as in the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, and especially that part known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, or Song of the Lord. These developments built upon the so-called *smarta* religion of the reforming Vedic priesthoods, originally a minority, to create a theistic (effectively, a monotheistic) religion – the God being Vishnu in these early texts. It emphasized not sacrifice but worship and devotion (*puja* and *bhakti*). Subsequently the traditions continued to evolve as a religion based around the worship of deities. It was adopted by courts and households, focused in temples, and repeatedly caught in popular imagination through buildings, pilgrimages, rituals, recitals, dance and drama. Local cults and deities were repeatedly assimilated into this religion, as different peoples and areas were incorporated into political systems, and thus into the realms of Vishnu and Shiva.

From the nineteenth century the traditions were popularized through printed words and images; in the twentieth century by film and television. By this time they had begun to contest with Christianity as well as Islam, and with modern science. As the early texts were more recently re-examined, three points were repeatedly made that had long been implied in some form. Firstly, there were accusations (mostly but not only from Westerners) about Brahmanical dominance and the sapping effect of religions so deeply concerned with renunciation and contemplation. Secondly, there were contrary claims (mostly but not only from Indians) that such a long religious and intellectual tradition marked the superiority of Indian morality and spirituality. Thirdly, there were pseudo-historical arguments linking features of current Indian society with this ancient past, as in claims about 'Aryan' or 'non-Aryan' traditions and characteristics, and above all in the new vigour with which caste-status was contested. All of these issues will be considered in their place; but we will turn now to the last of them, the problem of caste.

CUSTOMS: THE PROBLEM OF CASTE

Commonly Indian civilization is identified by distinctive forms of social organization, in particular by 'castes': separate, closed and ranked groups each with defined social behaviours. Caste-like arrangements were once thought to have existed, essentially

unchanged, from time immemorial. The famous study of Henri Dumont was entitled *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966), as if Indians, or at least 'Hindus', constituted a particular kind of humanity. In India, it was supposed, people were ranked permanently, acquiring an unchangeable status through birth and traditional occupation, and particularly in accordance with ideas of purity and pollution (according to work, conduct and inheritance). Caste was said to be India's most distinctive institution in the sense that it *determined* social behaviour – marriage, diet, meal-sharing, death-rituals, occupation, and so on. It *explained* economic and political alliances and the range of social control or dependence.

Not only defining the Hindus, caste also seemed dominant in the region. Though it never applied fully to all the peoples of South Asia, it was important even among non-Hindus, among 'outcastes' and outsiders (or *mleccha*). Indian Muslims or Christians might be divided into castes or treated as castes, though caste contradicted their egalitarian religious doctrines. For European missionaries the right attitude to caste observances became a matter of prolonged argument. Alternatively, through economic, political and environmental change, 'tribal' groups could be assimilated into the mainstream, as low-caste Hindus or 'Untouchables'. By some accounts, the caste system itself was attributed to an ancient reaction to South Asian indigenes by 'Aryans'; and the Untouchable, the most 'impure', was the necessary antithesis of the Brahman, the most 'pure'.

Given this pre-eminence, caste has also been variously characterized. The fact that caste status could persist independently of actual occupation and wealth or power led some to believe that it was a solely ritual or ideal system. Others noted that it could adapt itself to changing economic and political standing, leading to the suggestion that it was after all ultimately pragmatic and material, and that there was no unchanging hierarchy of castes. More recently, it has become increasingly common among scholars to deny the very existence, before the nineteenth century, of caste as defined by Dumont.

One problem is that the terms are treacherous. 'Caste' was a word of Portuguese origin (from *casta*, meaning type or birth), and reflected European attempts to understand what they observed and what was 'explained' to them. The informants were mostly Brahmans and Brahmanical texts. Particular accounts and treatises therefore came to be regarded as describing general and consistent conditions. These normative descriptions then paved the way

(along with geographical and demographic measurements) for the introduction of the generic terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism', supposing a single 'race' and 'religion'. But 'caste' did not equate neatly with indigenous terms, such as *varna* (roughly meaning occupational and status-band, order or category) or *jati* (endogamous, notionally occupational group or birth-type). And those terms themselves have not had consistent meanings or applications.

In the *Rig Veda*, as we have seen, the four *varna* are briefly related to parts of the body of the Purusha or cosmic man. The term may be translated as 'colour' (and each *varna* was given a colour in the *Mahabharata*), but it must have originally meant something like 'type' or 'kind', and one should not assume that skin colour had anything to do it. Nor is the hierarchy unambiguous. In subsequent social, religious and legal documents the four *varna* reappear with differing emphasis and meaning, arguably as an ideal rather than as practice. In the *Upanishads*, *varna* is elaborated into a formal code and explained by doctrines of reincarnation, *karma* and *dharma* (roughly fate and duty). *Manusmriti*, the laws of Manu (around 100 BCE), describe each *varna* as having a different function.

The term *jati* continues to be understood variously, but seems most usefully described as meaning a group of similar origin and type (from its etymology, thought to refer to birth, as does the related Latin word 'genus'). A *jati* is whatever unit is defined in practice by the actual contacts of marriage, interdining and so on. To the everyday importance of this term must be added the fact that the boundaries and *varna* ranking of different *jati* often could not be fixed or readily agreed – both were open to contestation and negotiation.

This implies that 'Hindu' society was not necessarily as rigid or as priest-ridden as suggested by the textual rules, which were largely produced by and for Brahmans. In practice, it was common to find dominant caste groups (often but not always Kshatriya) who lorded it over others, but Brahmans were not always regarded as either the highest caste or the arbiters of caste-status. Nor were the occupational associations uniformly meaningful: for example, Brahmans were mostly *not* priests, professionally, and many who acted as priests were not Brahmans.

This explains why it is sometimes argued that a rigid sense of caste, in which *jati* were definitively ranked in relation to *varna*, was not common until quite recently. In some senses this must be true,

because modern means of labelling, enumerating, organizing and communicating were not available in India until the nineteenth century. But we should not take this too far. The European observers invented the term 'caste' and undoubtedly affected Indian practice and understanding; but they did not imagine caste *ab initio*. They applied a misleading term, compounding at least two different concepts, but they did so to describe social behaviour which they had generally encountered.

Thus, over the millennia, social and political authority and behaviour have been influenced by recurrent 'caste-like' ideas. The 'civilizational' character of caste lies in the persistence of *varna* and *jati* over time and space within the Indian region. No one aspect defines their importance – not restrictions on marriage or occupation, not even ideas of pollution – for these may be found in many civilizations. Their role obviously is also much more than the mere existence of hierarchy. 'Caste' matters not because it is unchanging or in outline unique, but simply because of its persistence. India had long shared philosophical traditions, and had long been a literate society – not having mass literacy, but (as in mediaeval Europe) having widespread understanding of the power of writing and the authority of texts. The texts were selectively and differently interpreted at different times. They nevertheless enabled the generalization of certain codes in each period, and some perpetuation of particular traditions over time.

We will discuss the evolution of these ideas in later chapters, but it is worth adding now that we do need to distinguish caste's different meanings and practices over time. In the warring but vigorous eighteenth century, for example, warrior virtues were emphasized, not only among 'warrior' castes, but among 'priests' and 'cultivators'. The Brahmans who largely ruled western and central India were soldiers and administrators, rather than priests, in their values and daily life, though they retained their priestly label. In the succeeding colonial era, more pacific and 'private' virtues became useful. British orientalist scholars defined fixed caste and communal categories which the rulers endorsed; and the advent of print transformed the availability and influence of certain 'orthodox' religious texts. As many Brahmans became men of (Western) learning and modern professionals, they were more likely to be defined by the ritual 'purity' of their private lives (by ceremonies, exclusivity, vegetarianism and so on). Also, during the great economic transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Banias and other merchant

castes found many of these same elements of 'purity' congenial and important. The Bania and lawyer, M. K. Gandhi, made his own selection among 'pure' attributes to shape his very public private life and his struggle against colonial rule.

By the twentieth century, in spite (or in some ways because) of the alien government, a sizeable minority of Indians enjoyed richer resources, of technology and information, than their forebears had in the eighteenth. These could be used in a variety of ways. For example, some women gained independence, awareness and education, and the law began to identify rights and offer protection for 'women' as a category and as individuals – over *sati* (immolation of widows), in factory work, for the age of sexual consent, and so on. At the same time there was wider support for certain Brahmanical (which, perhaps crucially, were also to an extent 'Victorian') norms, such as the *pativrata* (perfect wife), that also marginalized women and their work. As individual property rights gained importance, Western law lumped women together with infants and incompetents. Similarly 'Hindu-ization' sought to isolate Hindus from non-Hindus, through the ideas of space, community and history that were propagated by Indian elites. So rich peasants often secluded their women when they could afford the housing and the loss of field labour, and prospering Brahmans and merchants tried to enforce a 'Hindu' morality and exceptionalism on law, literature, festivals and everyday life (even co-opting colonial rulers and missionaries as allies). Those they sought to include in their 'community' they also wished to exclude from power. Solidarities were promoted by fear of disapproval and fear of others.

ISLAM AND INDIAN PLURALITY

Many of the parts of South Asia which are now included in Pakistan were broadly associated with an 'Islamic world' as early as the eighth century, starting with Arab conquests in Sind, and developing further with the advent of the Turks from the eleventh century. Later, Islam was spread by other Muslim rulers, who, however, as we saw with the Mughals, were mostly also Indian in the sense of being based locally and having to accommodate local mores and interests. Islam was also spread through trade – for example, from very early times, by Arabs on the western seaboard; by Arab missionaries of the Shi'i Ismaili sect from the ninth century; and

later by mystic Sufis, especially in Bengal from about the thirteenth century.

Indian Muslims, as might be suggested by these various origins, ranged from rulers to merchants to artisans to farmers, from the rich and mighty to the poor and oppressed. They were widely and unevenly dispersed. By the nineteenth century, when their distribution became transparent through censuses, they constituted large majorities in Sind and what is now Bangladesh, about half of the population in undivided Punjab, an often influential tenth in north India, and much smaller minorities elsewhere.

Nowadays, as indeed in the past, Islam is seen as a culture and an identity as well as a religion, and often in opposition to other cultures, especially of the West but also of 'Hindu' India. Such views rest on an essentializing of the cultures which are being compared: for example, regarding everything in the West as rational and materialist, and everything in the East, including Islam, as irrational and religious. Cultural ethnicities were encouraged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not only by Christian colonialists who denigrated the 'pasts' which they supposed replaced by their superior 'modernity', but also because similar ideas were taken up by some who were trying to defend Islam or 'Hinduism'.

Indian Islam, however, was also both particular and various, taking forms related to but also often different from the sects which divided Muslims, including the main Sunni-Shi'a split. (Differing also over descent from the Prophet, the Sunni held that scholars had the right only to interpret divine law by studying what was recorded in the *hadith* or tradition, and the Shi'a that divine law may also be revealed by the chosen *imam* or descendent from the Prophet's son-in-law Ali, whom they hold to be the first legitimate successor as caliph. Shi'i influence was greatest in India in Sind and Gujarat before the nineteenth century, among immigrants from Iran and in the Deccani sultanates from the sixteenth century, and in Awadh under the eighteenth-century nawabs (rulers).) Most of all, Indian Islam reflected not only the expected orthodoxies, but also political accommodations with Hindu elites, as well as doctrinal and ritual overlaps with devotional Hinduism, and ignorance of the *shari'a* (Islamic law) in some regional and rural customs or worship. On the other hand, India was not a mere outpost: at times it contained some of the most important and vital centres of Islam, for example in the Sunni revival led in Delhi by Shah Wali-Allah (1703-62). The history of Islam in India made its adherents there well placed to

suggest responses to the crisis which beset all Muslims with the rise of European colonialism and Western science.

The range of reactions will be discussed in appropriate chapters. What may be noticed here is the extent to which they were religious in character. Muslim leaders naturally often traced their declining political fortunes to failures of religious orthodoxy. Modern means made it easier to communicate those rules and norms. They included newspapers, pamphlets and books; new societies and organizations; formal or 'professional' training of the *ulama*; new schools and universities with 'modern' but acceptable curricula; and large-scale travel by train and steamer to participate in the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). The outcome was a more unified Indian Islam and renewed pan-Islamic connections, as if in fulfilment of Allah's command that there should be a universal social and political community of believers. But also, paradoxically, the outcome was an Islam divided between nations. Within India, Islam became another unifying or 'imperial' force, alongside Hinduism, rather than an element of regional or class identities. Significantly, the political separatism of Muslims was generally weaker in Muslim majority than in Muslim minority areas.

ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

Two images are sometimes juxtaposed in regard to the economic history of India. One shows a long stagnation and a more recent chaos interrupted by capitalist investment, pax Britannica and the supposedly new penetration of trade. The second (to be considered in later chapters) portrays a long-term economic development that had been well advanced but was thwarted by colonial rule and European dominance.

The first view has several parts, including interpretations of immediately pre-colonial conditions. Here we will consider mainly the assertion that India stagnated, and indeed was resistant to profit, science and technology, at least until after the end of Mughal rule. This is a very misleading idea. In common with the rest of the Euro-Asian land mass, India had very long experience of movements of peoples and technologies, which generated different kinds of polity and economy. As we have seen, a series of migrations and invasions linked the Indian plains with Iran and west and central

Asia, from the earliest times. In the south, contacts with western Asia probably began before the Megalithic period (around 500 BCE). Thus trade has always been important, from the extensive exchanges of prehistory to the nineteenth-century revolution and the evolving world economies.

Technologies provided similar if less cyclical evolutions. The first to leave a lasting impact in India (developing over a very long period) were those related to domesticated animals, artificial irrigation, the plough and writing, all of which were familiar at least 5000 years ago. The wheel probably became important some two millennia later, when it was associated with the renewed expansion of the agricultural frontiers under the Aryans. The use of copper and possibly iron, and the Sanskrit language, were also all important at this time. The *noria* or *arghatta*, a wheel lined with buckets for raising water, was vital for irrigation, possibly as early as the start of the first millennium CE (though it is not unequivocally described in the sources), while its geared version, the Persian wheel, turned by bullock-power, was certainly taken up in mediaeval times under Islamic influence. Though technological innovation did not proceed at an even pace, there was little resistance to it. Empirical chemistry, mathematics, astronomy and medicine were all familiar to Indians. Military technologies too, from cavalry to cannon, were readily developed and adopted. Financial and accounting procedures were also refined from early times.

Adaptations and technical innovation resulted from both foreign contacts and indigenous effort. Some specifically 'Indian' features may be traced to environmental conditions. The landscape itself is mobile. It derives from vast tectonic movements that are building up the Himalayas by driving the subcontinental land mass against and under the main Asian plate. At the same time, great alluvial plains are still growing between the northern mountains and the old rocks of eastward-sloping peninsular India, which is itself punctuated by great river valleys. All these rivers are subject to silting and flooding and dramatic changes in their course. A mutating landscape has provided challenges for land management and reclamation. Another environmental reason for technological (and political) responsiveness is the periodicity and unreliability of India's rainfall. The predominant climatic force is the moist south-westerly monsoon, which prevails for three to five months in most years. It brings immensely heavy rainfall to the south-west and north-east, but progressively less towards the dry north-west.

On the other hand, the facts that north Indian civilizations were land-rich and generally well-watered played an important part in determining their stable agrarian character, allowing similarities to extend over time and space. Across the vast featureless plains, the culture was borne on sacred rivers and through the repetition of texts in word and stone. Gradually it spread from ancient landscapes into outlying regions, including the southern river valleys where water-management chiefly determined the social and political organization. In rocky and inaccessible places, by contrast, more isolated, heterodox traditions pertained. The landscape has also been shaped and reshaped by man over the millennia, though with more rapid change over the previous two or three centuries. Each generation has been influenced by its successors, even when they appeared very different from one another. Today archaeologists and historians agree that there was more continuity than used to be thought between the urban Harappan and the pastoralist Aryan civilizations, as indeed there was between all those that followed, to the present day.

Environmental homogeneity (unlike isolation) need not imply stagnation. Unified and commercial peoples arose repeatedly, and gave way to vigorous migrants or military groups, which in turn became sedentary and urban. An overall trajectory can be discerned, despite physical transience, technological adaptability, and political and economic variety. The predominant (though not steady) trend was firstly towards the expansion of agriculture, and then from dispersed and artisanal production to centralized and mechanized industries. India has participated, in its own ways, in a universal movement from pastoral and peripatetic production to a settled agriculture. Thus, ancient India was defined by the beginnings of long processes of centralization whereby lands and people (so-called 'tribals') were incorporated into a civilizational mainstream, to which they also contributed distinctive elements. The mediaeval period, once seen as a period of dislocation and decline, seems rather to have extended these inexorable regularizations, as illustrated by the distribution and chronology of the very many surviving inscriptions that celebrate and record gifts of land to temples and so on. The continual expansions and elaborations of political and social regimes, and of agriculture and production, were building 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' societies, and allowing the development of states, cities, markets and shrines.

Of course, the frontiers of settled agriculture have contracted as well as expanded, and generally throughout India's history only

certain regions have been fertile, wealthy and peaceful at any one time. At the end of the eighteenth century too, many still could and did live peripatetic lives: there were swidden (slash-and-burn) cultivators and pastoralists; horse and cattle raisers and dealers; tinkers, merchants and moneylenders; farm-workers and professional diggers or builders; soldiers, cavalry and military suppliers; *sadhus* (holy men) and warrior-monks; genealogists, minstrels, players and storytellers; and so on. As a consequence, there was *repeatedly* room for more people to become settled on the land. Many 'traditional' land tenures were designed specifically to bring new lands under the plough.

But, to repeat the point, this was not just a cyclical pattern. Even in the dry Tamil lands of the south, settled cultivation has been spreading for almost a thousand years. In the north and where artificial irrigation was possible, it has been doing so even longer. Subsistence, specialist and commercial cropping have been extended, through the establishment of both wet- and dry-farming regimes, and through great deforestations (though some forest still remains) or reclamations, for example in reaction to the eastward movement of the river systems in Bengal from the sixteenth century. Cultivation spread, sometimes into more marginal areas, and total output increased, until the so-called green revolution of the 1970s and beyond.

As already implied, closer and regular means were needed for the control of land and labour, wherever the agricultural frontier advanced. This brings us almost back to the political outline which began this chapter. Over hundreds of years from the point when groups first began to settle on land, appropriate political institutions and commercial production also began to evolve, and some people were subordinated as an agricultural labour force. Settled agriculture was linked to profit, land control, culture and mythology. The very early development of cities implied the existence of surplus extraction and probably market exchanges. The social hierarchy reflected this need to bring and keep land under the plough, to amass and protect capital, and to manage labour. Hindu texts, and for that matter Mughal manuals, provided theory and practical advice.

Especially in fertile, irrigated and densely populated regions, land had acquired value at an early date. Land control was justified by various tales of origin – rights of clearance, inheritance, gift or conquest. Rules tended to define land and restrict access, in the

form of many closely defined or overlapping rights. In practice it was possessed (and exchanged) by kings, temples, villages, castes, families and individuals as a core of specific rights embedded in networks of shared or contiguous interests, in the way that empires or settlements dominated their central and valuable territory, but held a more ambiguous suzerainty or 'common' rights over outlying areas or waste. These different principles of land use and land definition long coexisted.

However, the trend was towards subsuming them under state rule. All governments of India, as they sought to expand revenue, tried with greater or lesser success to develop independent central records, and to bypass or co-opt local intermediaries, and overcome local resistance. They imposed overarching supralocal structures and principles, at least within the heartlands of their empires. Over the last 150 years, increasing production for sale and export has similarly required and facilitated the expansion of capitalist management and modern forms of government. These did not wholly remove overlapping rights but tended to standardize all land into a few general types, governed by scientific measurement or a legal definition which overrode differences of use or ownership: not only distributing what had been common among separate owners or to the state, but also attributing the same legal incidents to a temple or a corporation's estate as to the land of an individual. Going further than most of their predecessors, the British also clamped down on 'vagrants', using military campaigns, legal and economic force, and ethnographical typing. Paradoxically they also encouraged mobility – through improved communications; protection for pilgrims, travellers and merchants; some education; and the recruitment of seamen, soldiers, and migrant or emigrant labour. They favoured movement, however, only within the norms and laws of a settled society.

On land, as on most other aspects of life, many prevailing accounts of modern India are narratives of loss. We are used to regarding the divisions of land and society in India – including religious communalism, casteism and poverty – as a decline from social and ecological harmony and from a self-sufficient localism, under the malign influence of capitalism and an exploitative, categorizing and divisive state. The long history of India invites the question: had that harmony ever really existed?

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